

Book reviews

Troubling Problems in Medical Ethics: The Third Volume in a Series on Ethics, Humanism and Medicine

Eds Marc D Basson, Rachel E Lipson, Doreen L Ganos
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DM84.00

The second volume in this series was reviewed in the December 1982 number of this journal. The present volume reports the sixth and seventh conferences arranged by the Committee on Ethics, Humanism and Medicine (CEHM) in the University of Michigan. This committee is a remarkable student organisation founded in 1978 which holds regular 'ethics grand rounds' at the Ann Arbor Veterans' Administration Hospital, luncheon meetings at the University of Michigan School of Nursing and many other seminars at the Medical School and at the College of Literature, Science and the Arts. In addition to these local activities which resemble those of the Medical Groups in the United Kingdom, CEHM holds regular large interdisciplinary conferences and it is the reports of these conferences which are published in this series. The books are of great value not simply because of the interesting and perceptive discussions on ethical problems but more particularly because of the construction and format of the discussions. Up to 400 register for each conference and these include staff and students not only from the University of Michigan but from other midwestern universities and also practising health care professionals, lawyers, philosophers and interested lay persons. You could say that the conferences are similar to the annual conferences of the London Medical Group but the format is rather different. Each day conference

covers four topics and each topic is introduced by two speakers, usually one clinical and one non-clinical. For each topic a case history is given and the conference divides into groups of ten to 12 persons to discuss the different aspects of the case. In the published form an introduction for each topic is written by a student; then follows the case for discussion; then the two papers by experienced authorities and finally the brief feedback and response from the discussion groups. So we get in published form, as it were, a combination of case conferences as presented in this journal with the proceedings of an annual LMG conference. Even leaving aside the longish papers, the introductory summaries and the case histories would make a good basis for discussion groups in medical schools or elsewhere and the book is worth acquiring for that purpose alone.

The senior editor Marc D Basson, as a student, founded the CEHM in 1978 and was the director up until the end of the seventh conference. He has now qualified as a doctor and is doing resident appointments away from Ann Arbor. He deserves special praise for his work for CEHM and for the production of these valuable publications. In his introduction to the seventh conference, which amounts to a valedictory note, he gives a very perceptive summary of different people's attitudes to moral problems. He classifies them as intuitionist, absolutist, relativist and pluralist. He regards the first as a dangerous shortcut, the second as a barrier to agreement and the third as a compromising of principles. He favours pluralism: 'The pluralist believes his moral judgments are right but recognises that they may be wrong. He acts on the basis of his own conclusions even when he risks great wrong, for his reasoning is the best he has to go on. On the other hand because he recognises (albeit doubtfully) that he might be in error, the pluralist does not generally

force his ethical beliefs on others'.

The eight topics covered in this volume are: affirmative action in medical school admissions; drug testing in prisons; treating children without parental consent; the decision to resuscitate – slowly; competence and the right to refuse treatment; when doctor and nurse disagree – an interface of politics and ethics; doctor draft – redistributing physicians; and the right to privacy when lives are at stake. There is perhaps nothing very original either in the topics or in some of the introductory papers but the approach is refreshing. On medical school admission policy the discussants, after hearing the moral and practical arguments, are asked to select two out of eight applicants whose varying attributes are set out. The arguments about drug testing in prisons are very well presented and an additional paper by a prisoner adds interest; the problem is not the same in countries outside the United States. On treating children without parental consent it is refreshing to have the case of a child in the middle of treatment for leukaemia rather than the traditional Jehovah's Witness; bringing an older child into the discussion is featured.

Some opening speakers deal with the particular case presented and others deal with the problem in general terms – perhaps the latter is the better approach in that the discussants are left to apply the general principles to the particular case. The book is well produced and there is a useful note about the background and status of each of the speakers. The fact that there are references after each paper and also at the end of the book is a little confusing. It is the construction of the conferences that is of particular interest. The students are greatly to be congratulated and there are suggestions which might well be taken up with profit by our own Medical Groups.

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